

Olcott-Johnson House  
Old Norwich Center  
Norwich Vicinity  
Windsor County  
Vermont

HABS No. VT-51

HABS  
VT  
14 NOR.V,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia 6, Pa.

HABS  
VT  
14. NOR.V.

HABS No. VT-51

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### OLCOTT-JOHNSON HOUSE

Location: Old Norwich Center, 1.7 miles North on continuation of Main Street from Norwich Plain Village Green to an intersection. Right on a country road, east-southeast, 0.25 mile. House on North side of road, Norwich Vicinity, Windsor County, Vermont.

Present Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Albert H. Johnson, Norwich, Vermont.

Present Occupant: The owners.

Present Use: Private residence.

Brief Statement of Significance: Built by Peter Olcott, prominent in the early history of the town and Lieutenant Governor of Vermont (see Supplemental Material, Part I.C. 1 and 2).

## PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Peter Olcott (d.1808); Peter Olcott's heirs who rented the house to various tenants (early 19th century); Daniel Johnson (early 19th century to c. 1867); Horace P. Coleman; Milton Coleman; daughter Louise Coleman who married Albert H. Johnson, grandnephew of Daniel Johnson; Albert Johnson.
2. Date of Erection: 1772-1773 (White and Johnson); 1780 (Recollections of Mrs. Milton Coleman); see Supplemental Information.
3. Notes on alterations and additions: Addition in rear and alterations of front door and closing up of side door probably took place when Daniel Johnson acquired house in mid 19th century (see I.C.2).
4. Sources of information
  - a. The American Heritage Book of Great Historic Places, Richard M. Ketchum, editor (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1957), 71.
  - b. Herbert Wheaton Congdon, Old Vermont Houses (Brattle-

boro: Stephen Daye Press, 1940), 45-47, figs. 26, 27.

- c. Dorothy and Richard Pratt, A Guide to Early American Homes--North (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1956), 86.
  - d. Philip Aylwin White and Dana Doane Johnson, Hugh S. Morrison, editor, Early Houses of Norwich, Vermont (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College, 1938), 10, 12, 16-19, figs. 17, 18, 19.
  - e. Old Buildings Project of the Robert Hull Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont, Burlington, 1937-1938.
  - f. Mrs. Albert H. Johnson, "The Olcott-Johnson House", is in the possession of Mrs. Albert H. Johnson, Norwich, Vermont, copy in HABS Photo-Data book.
  - g. Interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Albert H. Johnson, Norwich, Vermont.
- B. Historical Events Connected with Structure: Town meetings held in "Mr. Olcott's House" 1774 to 1780 (Norwich Town Records), see Part I.C.2.
- C. Supplemental Material
- 1. From: Philip Aylwin White and Dana Doane Johnson, Hugh S. Morrison, editor, Early Houses of Norwich, Vermont, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1938, p.17.

"Peter Olcott was one of the town's most prominent citizens. He came to Norwich in 1772 or 1773. A committee report of October 30, 1773, concerning the location of a church, refers to "Peter Olcott's house" and since he had already been in town "about a year" (p.64) it is quite possible that the house was built as early as 1772. Since he was a man of wealth, influence, and mature years, he probably would have built a fine residence soon after his arrival in town. Town meetings were held in his house from 1774 to 1780. He also kept a store near his residence during the Revolution.

"Mrs. Milton Coleman, at present living in the house,

VT.  
10. Nov 7.

HABS No. VT-51

OLCOTT-JOHNSON HOUSE  
page 3

believes it was built for Peter's son, Mills Olcott, in 1780, and that the Peter Olcott house stood near the present one, but was torn down fifty or sixty years ago. After a careful examination of available evidence, this seems improbable. Mills Olcott was only six years old in the 1780 (b. May 21, 1774), and it is unlikely that his father would have built such a fine residence for so youthful a gentleman. Moreover, after Mills graduated from Dartmouth College in the year 1800, he settled in Hanover, while the Peter Olcott family continued to be prominent in Norwich affairs for many years. There is reference to "the Olcott House" as late as 1834, when the widow Bissell lived in it, but there is no available reference to two Olcott houses in any documents, nor is there a sign of any but the present house on the old maps of this vicinity."

2. Notes by Mrs. Albert Johnson on The Olcott-Johnson House, Norwich, Vermont;

With the removal of old landmarks and the death of those who knew the locations of roads and buildings, there is the possibility of vanishing knowledge that would be interesting to preserve. Since my father was a man of the "Center" it seems fitting to pass on some information relevant to the "Center" with the story of the Olcotts.

Peter Olcott who was not one of the original proprietors of Norwich (came here in 1773 from Windsor, Connecticut following the death of two sons). He was born in Bolton, Connecticut.

In the study "Early Houses of Norwich, Vermont" by two Dartmouth students under the direction of Professor Hugh Morrison and "Old Vermont Houses" by Herbert Wheaton Congdon it is stated that this house was built in 1773 the year Peter Olcott came from Connecticut. It is one of the purposes of this paper to refute that information. My father believed the Olcott house was built on the knoll in what is now a field belonging to Mrs. Clap. A rose bush grew up every year and blossomed by the spot that father believed to have been by the door-step of the first Olcott house. Later Mr. J. Hartley Nelson plowed out a timber there that was probably one of the first Olcott

House. In the History of Norwich, Vt. by Goddard and Partridge, it is stated that the first Meeting House was built "about 20 rods a little north of west from Capt. (Peter) Olcott's dwelling house, on the north side of the highway." Certainly this house is much more than that distance from the "Center" where the meeting house was built. There was a row of granite posts around the corner of the field which probably marked the edge of their yard and on which were wooden posts supports for a picket fence. This summer Mrs. Clap had several of them removed.

More recently Mrs. Butler who has done much research concerning the Olcotts has found references to Martha occupying the home after her parents lived elsewhere - probably with Mills Olcott at Hanover in what today is known as the Choate House. I was told that this house was built the same year that The Choate House was built - that would be 1785.

But if this house was built, as my father often told, "by Peter Olcott for his 'profligate' son, Mills Olcott," it might have been a few years later as Mills graduated from Dartmouth College in 1790. A large two story house having windows with small panes as in colonial houses. The front entrance had two panelled solid doors, one of which is now used as the door into the woodshed. There was an entrance on the west side of the house having a small porte cochere porch or portico so that one might be covered as one got into a vehicle for riding. The woodshed was on the east. There is a row of dentils just under the eaves on three sides of the house but none on the east side, indicating the location of the woodshed. The house has a large central chimney as was characteristic of early built houses. There are four fireplaces, two in the front rooms downstairs and two upstairs. Three of them have been bricked up and the one in the guest room upstairs is unfinished around the edges and without the hearth stone. There was a large fireplace where the cooking was probably done in the long room which extends across the back of the house. The west entrance admitted one to this room. Panelling can be seen extending along the south wall. When Albert Johnson excavated the cellar he found ashes on the ground under where the fireplace was located - where our (cook

stove) Home Comfort Range sits." The back stairs extended from the well room into an open chamber above. Where our pantry is was a small bedroom.

The house has the characteristics of early American construction: hand hewn beams that may be seen in attic and cellar; wide boards under shingles on the roof; hand made nails; h and l hinges; and much fine panelling and wainscotting. In fact, Mr. Herbert Wheaton Congdon said he had not seen in Vermont any better than that in the front east room, and not another wine closet with such lovely wainscotting. There is a chimney closet opening out of our dining room which is inside the chimney - the sides entirely of brick. A clothes closet is in front of the chimney closet - such as was used for the underground railways for concealing escaped slaves.

The water supply was furnished from a well under the north east corner of the house. My father always called the room above it where our water barrel and sink are as the "well room".

Peter Olcott died in Hanover at the home of his son Mills in 1808. Mills Olcott died in 1845. Research done by Mrs. Butler recalls the probable fact that this house was the home of Roswell Olcott who lived near his father's home and attended business for him (Peter Olcott). He planted Lombardy poplars that grew well here. He was active in town affairs. He was town representative to the General Assembly in 1797 and 1798. A few years later he went to Canada to manage business investments of Mills who had bought from his father-in-law, Asa Porter, some undeveloped land in Brome. The farm was rented until \_\_\_\_\_.

Daniel Johnson purchased 6/7 of a tract of land (the Governor Olcott Farm) from the Olcott heirs. Papers finished November 19, 1853 or January 5, 1854 (so next November [i.e. 1953] this will have been 100 years in the combined families of Johnson & Coleman.) Mills Olcott's children signing the deed - and he made many drastic changes. The present front door with side windows - the removal of the western entrance completely and the construction of the woodshed on the North - removing the one on the east. He took out the large fireplace altogether.

There is a stone in the Meeting House Hill cemetery denoting the death of Martha S. daughter of Daniel & Sophia Johnson who died Aug. 21, 1863, at 9 yrs. 6 mos. 15 days. Whether this or another sorrow came to the Johnson family they sold the farm the seventh day of November 1868 to my grandfather Horace Pinneo Coleman and his son William Otis Coleman. I understand that Daniel Johnson and family went West and at a later date he regretted having left the farm here.

We have since found out that John William Johnson, the father of Daniel, David, Alba (Albert's grandfather) and others, lived a short distance beyond this place on the opposite side of the road in what now belongs to the Willey Farm. He was lame and a cobbler.

There were many apple trees on the farm - some in every field and I can remember six or seven here in the front yard. There was an old very tall Lombardy Poplar Tree to the west side and a Fir Balsam in front of the house. I recall a number of times when riding over towards Hanover Center where my grandmother Hurlbutt lived that my father would point out the tops of those trees and say that is where we live.

There were two large barns - probably built by the Olcotts with sheds joining.

I believe Grandfather Coleman was born in Hanover- There is no house to mark the place and the land is owned by the Hanover Water Company. Grandfather Coleman brought three maple trees from the old Coleman place and planted them - one west of the house and two in the front yard. Two are standing but one was blown over in the hurricane of 1938. After grandfather's marriage to Martha Louisa Dewey in Berlin, Vt. they went to live in Lunenburg. There their children were born one of whom, Charlie died at eleven years of age during an epidemic of scarlet fever.

Their oldest daughter Abbie came back to Hanover and became teacher in the Christian Street school. In May 1868 she married Charles Dana Hazen and went to live in his home at Brookside Farm. She wanted her parents to come back to this vicinity and wrote to them of available farms. They came to Norwich and spent some weeks in the brick house in Lewiston where later Mr. Ransom

Lewis lived. January 1869 the Colemans moved here and Uncle Charles Hazen called the place Maple Hill Farm.

The family consisted of Grandfather, grandmother, Uncle Otis, Aunt Martha, Aunt Lucia, my father and grandmother's sister Miss Mary Dewey. Uncle Otis went to Salt Lake City to assist his Uncle Otis Dewey who was paymaster in the Army. My father who was called "Milton" was thirteen years old when he came here to live. Aunt Martha taught school at the center. He went to school to her the Winter term 1870. (Book given him by her). He also attended the classical boarding school in the University Building in the village. (Aunt Lucia, more familiarly known as Nettie Coleman graduated from Mt. Holyoke in 1880 the year her father died.) In 1878 he went West to visit some Dewey Cousins and to "seek his fortune". He went to Sheffield, Illinois, later to Denver, Colorado and on to Leadville and Manitou where he had some experiences with prospectors and others. However, letters from home urged him to return if he couldn't find something better and he came home a short while before his father died.

Then the Coleman Brothers took over running the farm. They took milk to the creamery at Hanover. They cut hemlock lumber and peeled it selling the bark to the tannery in the village. They worked hard to pay off the mortgage on the farm. Uncle Otis lived a short while for he died in 1884 aged only 37 yrs. 10 mos.

Meanwhile Aunt Martha helped at home and at Aunt Abbie's. She was interested in painting and friends assisted her with the art. She worked at the hospital in Northampton for a short while but seemed to be needed here and came home.

Always the family was associated with the church and interested in its Missionary enterprises. When I, as church clerk, received some material for safe-keeping, I found a note book containing the records of early meetings of the Missionary Society of which Aunt Martha had been secretary and treasurer. She also had a class of beginners in the Sunday School and I have a few copies of quarterlies she used. I was interested in the names recorded as pupils - among them Connie Hazen, Ethel Bond,



VT-51  
HABS No. VT-51

OLCOTT-JOHNSON HOUSE  
page 8

Mildred Hutchinson and Edith Ackerson. My grandfather was for several years a deacon in the church and my father was later. He served as deacon thirty-five years.

Aunt Martha had windows changed - present ones. She died in 1892.

My father rented farm to Frank Johnson for 1 year. He went west. Returned in 1893 and on November 9, 1893 brought his bride Celia Estelle Hurlbutt here from Hanover Center.

My sister and I born here.

Farmed well until illness came. Operation performed in this room by Dr. Gile of Hanover.

Many experiences omitted.

A and I married here.

Letter from Aunt Isobel - 1929 - recalling pleasant visit when her uncle lived here.

Father died February 1931.

We bought farm. Built cow stable and milk house. Excavated cellars. Put on new clapboards. Built cow barn. We helped. Improved buildings.

Mother died August 1940.

Electricity October 1940. Brick wall from cellar up under windows of 1st floor.

Allen Chadwick comes April 1941.

House has stood through 2 hurricanes. Some scars of 2nd one remain.

Paper in blue room very old - put on by Daniel Johnson.

House insulated.

Artesian well.

House through the years the place of many happy gatherings.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement

1. Architectural Character: Early example of Georgian influence in hip roof and proportions. Better than average interior trim and panelling for area. Grouping of windows on front characteristic of early houses in middle Connecticut Valley.
2. Condition of Fabric: Good. Kept in repair.

### B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions and orientation: L-shaped plan with wood shed; 40' x 24' front block, plus 24' x 16' ell. Two stories plus cellar and attic. Faces southwest.
2. Foundations: Field stone partly reinforced with concrete abutments.
3. Wall construction: Hewn frame with vertical boards and clapboard siding. Said to have brick nogging lower floor (cannot be inspected).
4. Openings
  - a. Doorways and doors: Northwest side door removed. Front door and door frame not original, but one leaf of original 6 panel door preserved. Kitchen door modern.
  - b. Windows and shutters: Double hung, 2 light sash. Original 12/12 light sash preserved. Front shutters late adjustable louver type. Original fixed louver shutters on Southeast only.
5. Roof
  - a. Shape - covering: Hip roof with part gable in rear. Asphalt shingles.

b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed with crown mould and fascia. Fine dentil course below (dentils discontinued around rear). Section of wooden gutter on rear of main block.

c. Dormers: Two small dormers in rear of attic.

6. Chimneys: One large center chimney with 4 fireplaces. Smaller rear chimney replaces earlier one.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor Plan: Central chimney type plan. Small stair hall flanked by 2 large rooms. Kitchen and 2 small rooms in rear. Bedrooms upstairs in similar arrangement.
2. Stairways: Narrow, panelled main stair U shaped, in entrance hall. Rear stair and basement stair.
3. Floor: Wide Pine boards throughout.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Vertical boards papered over. Panelled dado in 2 front rooms and kitchen. Fireplace walls of front rooms completely panelled.
5. Doorways and doors: Original 6 panel doors in 2 front rooms. Other doors various later types.
6. Trim: Moulded trim front rooms and kitchen. Built in wine closet with panelled door and flanking pilasters in dining room.
7. Hardware: Original wrought iron hardware on fragment of front door. Original H-I hinges and latches in 2 front rooms.
8. Lighting: Electric.
9. Heating: Three of four fireplaces blocked off. Heating by stoves.

D. Site

1. General Setting: Typical farmhouse on slightly rising ground surrounded by Sugar Maple trees.
2. Enclosures: Typical farm enclosures. Stone walls, wood and wire fences.

VT  
HAB-200  
HABS No. VT-51

OLCOTT-JOHNSON HOUSE  
page 11

3. Outbuildings: Wood shed, barns, carriage shed, poultry yard, etc.
4. Walks: None.
5. Landscaping: No planned landscaping. Informal with lawn, trees, shrubs.

Prepared by Henry C. Edwards and  
Osmund R. Overby, Architects, National  
Park Service, 143 South Third Street,  
Philadelphia 6, Pa. - September 1959.